

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS WORK THROUGH A Private Social Agency

The field of social work is sometimes thought of as including only casework, community organization, and social agency administration. It is as we see the needs for special welfare services crying for attention, that we recognize the more varied foci for the efforts of the trained social worker. These special services often cannot be categorized as casework, community organization, or social agency administration; nor can they be accurately fitted into a picture of family or psychiatric casework, group work, etc. The work of the Urban League Industrial Relations Secretary in any one of the forty-eight local Urban Leagues and the National Urban League, (with which the forty-eight are affiliated) is such a special service. It is a service geared to meet the needs of individuals or very large numbers of individuals in employment, or in securing employment commensurate with their highest abilities.

Since I completed my courses at the New York School of Social Work the first of this year, I have been employed at the New Jersey Urban League, (a private social agency) Newark, New Jersey, as Industrial Relations Secretary. Since this job necessitated the use of (to say the least) a very interesting combination of skills normally thought of as belonging to one or more of the major fields of social work mentioned above, I have been asked to describe and discuss it, for the Alumni News Letter. There will not be space in this article to discuss the specific application of various social work skills to individual problems encountered in this job; however, the indication of what skills are used at various points of the total program might be readily seen.

What this job includes may most quickly be seen from the following outlines:

1. Employer and Employee Contacts

A. Conferences with top management officials of large industries and business concerns.

1. To promote the successful use and integration of minority group workers, in industrial plants and/or non-industrial companies.
2. To promote utilization of Negroes in positions previously and usually refused to non-whites.
3. To consult and/or to give advice on special personnel problems.

B. Conferences with Union Officials

1. To help plan on union procedures and policies that affect minority groups.
2. To institute educational programs - at the request of union bodies.

C. Workers Education Program

Conferences with non-union workers, individuals, or groups of union workers in different locals.

1. To inspire understanding and fruitful cooperation between individuals and/or groups of different color, creed, or race.

2. To help formulate constructive opinion and action on the most acute problems confronting specific workers or groups of workers generally.
3. To organize groups of workers into effective Worker Councils helping to find solutions for their own problems.

2. Agency Contacts

Close cooperation with other agencies in the North Jersey area, that make contributions pertaining to Employment, Manpower, Personnel policies, Workers' Education and training, etc.

1. Government agencies
2. Private agencies
3. Volunteer groups

3. Job Placement

A. Establishment of and filling of job orders, especially for:

1. Applicants possessing unusual skills, whose skin color usually causes less or no attention to be paid to hiring them at their highest skills and personal qualifications.
2. Hard-to-understand job-applicants, who present personal problems that cause them to be relegated to the unemployed or to sub-standard jobs when applying in other places for referral.

B. Counseling

1. Casework with individuals whose emotional or physical problems make them unstable or less valuable employees or prospective employees.
2. Vocational guidance to persons desiring it.

4. Fact Finding and Dissemination

A. Determination and compilation of knowledge about the industrial scene, which gives the department's work factual bases, and greater accuracy.

1. Material secured from reports of fact-finding organizations, newspapers, journals, etc.
2. Special studies made by the Department.

B. Informational releases which the department is in a peculiar position to give.

1. Special articles to the Press, which call attention to important trends and problems in areas which have broad-and-better importance to minority groups and especially to Negroes-at-large.
2. Responding to requests from other agencies and individuals for special information.

C. Public Address

1. On a variety of subjects

a. Representing the position of the department

b. Representing the position of the community

It should be mentioned that the work indicated in the outline is not the same in all local Urban Leagues. The main aspects of the work are the same, but the relative importance of specific points is not the same. The specific needs of each community determine the type of general program, which might or might not include "conferences with top management officials", "conferences with union officials", etc; but practically all Urban Leagues carry on Job Placement work and some form of Workers Education Program.

The Industrial Relations Secretary is usually responsible for the development of the program for his department, with the approval of the Executive Secretary, and the advice of an Industrial Committee. This committee meets with the Industrial Secretary each month and helps determine policy work emphases. (The Industrial Committee is composed of seven members of the Agency's Board, who are well acquainted with or outstanding in the industrial relations work of individual companies or unions.) This is the case in the New Jersey Urban League. When I was being considered for the job here, the Executive Secretary outlined the problems in this area, pointed out the "must" features of the work, and asked for my thinking about the work of the Urban League Industrial Relations Secretary and how I would develop it here. It might be seen therefore, that the job includes program planning, Board relationship, and some administration, that makes training in social agency administration extremely helpful.

As for the execution of the general program, a question is certainly in order here which might ask how one person can fill the four aspects of work. Frankly, it is a job that should have full time of two or three workers (some Urban Leagues have four or five workers in the Industrial Department); but for budget reasons, not unfamiliar to private social agencies, all four emphases have to be carried out by one person - the Industrial Relations Secretary. It means a division of time; and a conscious attempt, on the one hand, to keep any one aspect from being neglected while some other aspect demands as much time as can possibly be given. On the other hand, it is necessary to draw certain phases of the work to successive points of development at the proper time so as to prevent disrupting lapses in work with other phases.

One indication of the relationship of the work of the various local Urban Leagues to each other is the study in several League offices that a new Secretary does before undertaking his own job. When I began work on April 1, 1944, I became thoroughly acquainted with Industrial Relations offices in the New York area. (In the past few months, periods have been spent in the Industrial Relations department of the New Jersey Urban League by three appointees en route to posts in three different parts of the country.) In any case, acquaintance with the way the work is done in other offices was followed by orientation to the specific industrial problems and procedures in northern New Jersey.

The most important part of the job has to do with Employer and Employee Contacts, as presented in the outline. Conferences with Presidents, Directors of Industrial Relations, or Personnel, or Employment Managers of plants, help determine their position on the integration of persons in plant personnel (at all levels) without regard to color creed, or race. This same is true about conferences with Union officials. With either, representatives of Management or a Union, understanding is accomplished and policies, projects or problems may be discussed realistically.

Since there are about 1500 industrial plants in the area, of varying sizes and types, first concentration has been on plants with more than 1000 employees, since these contacts affect larger numbers of persons. However, plants with about the same number of workers as employed in them before the war, are seen though there are less than 1000 employees. This is because the progress along lines of interracial education and integration of Negroes is less likely to be undone by loss of war contracts or other production stimulated by the war. When plants call on the department for help, though no previous contact has been made and regardless of the size of the plant, the request is worked on immediately.

This type of work may be at the request of another agency. A very important government agency recently requested the Industrial Relations department of the New Jersey Urban League to make a study, analysis, and recommendations concerning a certain group of New Jersey plants. It will involve Management and (organized) workers alike. It will require an intensive study and analysis of management and worker attitudes, responsibilities, and actions (official and unofficial). Personalities will have to be evaluated at each step of the way, since presumably conditions giving rise to the excessive problems in this group of plants are similar in some other plants of the same type but not experiencing the same immediate grave problems. It is hoped that the results of this particular job will help to solve problems of excessive labor turn-over and absenteeism.

The field of Industrial Relations as approached by a skilled worker (social) provides a distinct challenge. The various ramifications of the work provided opportunity for use of more numerous abilities than might be provided in, say, case work only. However, the job represents a specialization in itself. The person doing it will soon recognize this and direct his energies accordingly.